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Archiving a Socially Engaged Practice

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4-29-2016

## Archiving A Socially Engaged Practice

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### Recommended Citation

Walsh, Lexa, "Archiving A Socially Engaged Practice" (2016). *Archiving a Socially Engaged Practice*. 1.  
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# Archiving a Socially Engaged Practice

## A Best Practices Workbook

### The Proposition

In fifty years, there will be a major retrospective on Socially Engaged Art. How will this work be contextualized? What, if any, visual, tactile ephemera is there to show? What about documentation? Related programming? Re-creation of works? How will this be a conceptually compelling and visually interesting show? Is it even a “show”? How will participating/ collaborating communities/publics be represented? How will visitors understand both the process and the outcomes of this transient, ephemeral work? What, if any, of the archive has monetary or art world value? Why? Artists: What can you save to show? What are your responsibilities in preserving your legacy? Institutions: How are you preserving the memory of this work? What are your responsibilities, whether from the curatorial side or education/public programs? What questions do we still have?

#### ARTISTS' RESPONSIBILITIES

Agonist and distributed archives, where authorship is diffused.  
You save:  
Screen shots  
Emails  
PDFs  
Folders of research  
Photocopies of readings  
Small explanatory booklets that contextualize the projects  
Paper archive box  
Many boxes of small pieces of paper  
Source images  
Hard drives  
Photos, transcripts  
Artist-written texts about our own projects  
Texts about the works by others  
Photos of process  
Photos of finished projects  
Screen grabs of press clippings  
Timely objects  
Newspapers of the day  
Magazines  
Ephemera  
Promotional stuff

As women, we should really, really make sure we archive our projects. In the future, someone will be represented, and so it should probably be women and gender non-conforming, trans-inclusive peoples.

Project documentation: prints, propaganda  
Permanent installation, e.g. a live projection that never goes off  
Novel social forms that are identifiable in the 'wild'  
Preserved social forms that were endangered or are extinct  
Create a consistent fingerprint/ approach that's evident across many forms, across a body of work  
A library of the rehearsing material (like in theater)

#### INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

Pay for projects to be archived  
Find independent specific archivists for projects (people that know about the topic).  
Find a graduate student writing their thesis on this  
Create institution specifically for archiving social practice work.  
Take in collections of Social Practice/ Social Practitioner's work  
Visit artists' studios/ personal archive  
Institutions/ educational institutions hold workshops to help.  
Museums/institutions will historicize work, keep track of concurrent work, exhibit Social Practice works with other works that are conceptually/ topically similar but not necessarily also socially engaged.  
Creative exhibition strategies:

- Interactive
- Digital (use of digital strategies)
- Immersive (projections) dynamics

Oral history as a method; the exercise of archiving through a socially engaged perspective.  
Acknowledging transformative and historical context, as these may differ.  
Create a time capsule of the present questions, frameworks and concerns, to trace their evolution in 50 years.  
Create a forest as time sculpture of present concerns.  
Go to people, as an institution. (As opposed to waiting for/ expecting publics to come to you.)  
Let the artist do whatever they want.  
Give them money to do it.  
Maintain the archives you are responsible for.  
Activate work, re-performing it.  
Publish books. Publish online.  
Create and share videos. Participate in social media.  
Fundraise from diverse sources in order to present work as accessible as possible.  
Include, directly, the voices of communities that made/ are involved in the art being presented in the show/taught about/written about.  
Reflect on, and share in public, ways your institution is reflective of dominant power systems and how that bolstering of oppression is being negated/negotiated/addressed/embraced.

## What does the show look like?

Exhibitions will be built not as a single level of discourse but as multiple echoes of those ideas. Counter publics will have a parallel space.

Have a record of the full spectrum, including projects who 'failed' today.

A book about the impact of work over 50 years.

Drugs that evoke the emotional state of enacting the archived work. (Based on emotions that are recorded.)

Holograms, videos, virtual representations.

Create space of deep empathy.

Reality TV show based on enacting work of artist.

A planned/ intentional/ community where people live, based on enacted work.

In different forms- the visitor can select from ways to see the art (camera/ TV/ live/ photos)

Not in a gallery, not in a room, in nature. (Like post-studio, this is post-museum, post-institution)

Annual exhibition on an island, in nature.

As an annual public meeting of a community of practice.

Instead of looking at leftovers of a process, look at the actual process happening virtually

Women only, two token men

Holograms

VR (virtual reality)

Opportunity for public to step into the role of artist, virtually. Eg. You can wash the steps of the courthouse like MLU

Have institution recreate projects via artist instruction for work

There will be a larger demand for interacting with the artwork, via immersive experiences

Virtual reality may democratize access to art—you won't have to leave your house to see a show, you could put on the googles and hang out with the art

Should include dead technology—iphone 6 with Instagram on it, Oculus Rift

The installation may look like an Apple Store  
Dead technology also includes PAPER

Social Practice might be old news by this point.

This show should include schools, activist practices

How will we include it all?!?!?

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***This information was generated at a workshop held with California College of the Arts' Social Practice MFA/MA class in April 2016. Special Thanks to class leader Amy Balkin, and for the generous conversation with participating students and guests Paulina Berczynski, Shagheyegh Cyrous, Benjamin De Kosnik, Susana Eslava, Nicole Lavelle, Kimberlie Moutoux, Gilda Posada, Lucy Mandali Oriane Wedd, Rachel Weidinger and Noula Zeng. For a digital version, and workshop results generated from 2015's Open Engagement conference in Pittsburgh, PA, visit <http://archivingsea.tumblr.com>***

—Lexa Walsh

## How will participating/ collaborating communities/ publics be represented?

With as much voice as the artist. With more voice than the artist.

By being visually, verbally and physically present in the show.

Use the show as an opportunity to build up the political/social structure of the participating/ collaborating communities/publics. Build regional autonomy, as part of a continually moving process.

Good archiving and documenting.

Different workshops and talks.

Include the demographics of the communities/ public

Use visual, verbal and structural 'language' that is legible to the participating/collaborating communities/publics.

A website or blog that can include all projects, documentations, results...

Collaborate with the public/community to both design and promote the show.

Provide feedback mechanisms within the show itself. Potentially anonymous feedback. Create a dialogue within the show, with the artist.

Use the power of the show/institution to aggregate, notice, and redistribute power to the communities/publics.

Use the show as an opportunity to be emotionally nutritious to the communities/ publics

The art can provide a foothold for emotional health/balance, a foothold towards positive power. A project not only based in criticism, but instead in productive power.

Follow-up after project has ended: How did it go? What did I actually (honestly) think of the project (as a participant/artist/audience) Were the goals achieved by the project/artists?

Don't want to be the token brown person- don't include my picture as the only brown person who showed up.

Contextualizing the honest, actual situation that the participation occurred in.

Giving people agency- explaining how participants images/content/input will be used (frame it accurately)

Choose words wisely/accurately when framing the project: collaborator, audience, anti-public, participant, exchange, contributor, interact, "engage", spectator, "what do they get?"

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## How do you (the artist) want to be represented in the archives?

Tino Sehgal's interpreters, have these in archives

Choose someone who knows a lot about that subject to make the archive

As one of many

Visible, with a name

Master facilitator

Self/artist representation

As learning, changing, making mistakes (not as heroic, iconic, god-like)

Inspirator, Inspirer (legacy is sphere of work), inspirer

Just visible enough that people who are hungry for similar things can find the work. Work together and not feel alone

The archive of me should be always changing. The archives structure should be like a hyperlink to get in touch with the person.

Who makes the archive? Show different versions. The archive should change.

**What questions do we still have?** What if any, 'institutions' will exist in 50 years? Do we want institutions to exist? What kind? What instead of institutions? How will social practice artists have gained more power? What kind of power? More voice? Balance of voice with media? Will social practice projects remain outside the 'object oriented' art world? What will be the overlaps of social practice art and activism? In 50 years will we, as social practice artists, have the freedom to make critical statements and ask difficult questions? What technologies augment or inhibit social practice work? How will the creation maintenance evolution of social forms have changed? Is ephemeral art possible under ubiquitous surveillance? How will social practice work have created/contributed/ supported refuge? How will the relationship of artist to public changed? Stayed the same? How will social practice art be represents itself? With leftover objects from ephemeral projects? Other ways? What other disciplines do we need to learn about? Medicinal biochemistry? Coding? Psychology? The gestalt structure of society? Will social practice be more or less related to social change? To personal change? Will we have electricity or not? How can we do/archive/ show social practice work without electricity? Will social practice art be absorbed by the advertising industry, like visual has been? What ways can we represent many voices in our work? What is the right for those involved in a project to permanently withdraw their record of presence? Does the action of archiving redirect socially engaged practices from other more ephemeral practices? How do forms that aren't understood as art forms right now, could potentially become art representations in the future? I.E: Seed Museum is today considered agronomy not social practice. How to archive radical practices or marginal practices in the future? I.E: May Day archive. How is the work of Tom Marioni (drinking beer with friends) being archived? What is authorship from the artists point of view? How to better represent the rights of ownership, heritage of communities shown in institutions? How to create channels for the exchange between communities, artists and institutions? How should the semantics of art practice be revalued to be accessible by broader audiences? If today is "contemporary time" what "time" will it be in the future? Do we value (our work) being remembered after we die (as artists)? Do we even want to be remembered? By whom? "I think it would be cool, but it's not a priority." How will social practice be regarded in history? Will it become a household phrase? Will a larger non-art public know what it is/was? Will it be like Andy Warhol? Will it be like the Mona Lisa? Picasso? How will funding work in the future? Will there be corporate funding? Will the government provide more or less funding? How will phases of funding work, will we be in a slump or a peak in 2066? Will companies have residencies? Will I even care when I'm 78 years old? Will this be seen as an idealistic moment? A moment just before DISASTER? Just before population increase? Will this be seen as a privileged moment? A clueless moment? What will happen to Social Practice if Trump (any GOP candidate) becomes president? What will a social/political change mean for funding? Opportunities? Social climate? How will social practice (continue to) fill the gaps that government leaves? Will it be a given that "the social" is a part of art? Will social practice be integrated more fully into the larger landscape of art? Or will it become more separated? What will happen to educational programs related to Social Practice? Who are the collectors of social practice art? What do they collect? How much do they pay? When did they acquire it? How do you own a project? What does it mean for the artist to have someone own your work? Your whole project? What social practice projects are owned now? Should we start making a film right now that someone can use later? How can oral storytelling/ the power of word-of-mouth be utilized to remember projects? What are other ways besides visual and written documentation to share projects with future publics? Aka can you create myths/ stories/socially normalized narratives that are passed around?